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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Human rights, Policy, U.S. foreign policy

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William Schulz's edited volume, The Future of Human Rights, is an interesting collection of essays, most notably for the policy-oriented reader. The chapters engage a wide array of topics that affect US foreign policy including: terrorism, humanitarian intervention, social and cultural rights, workers' rights, women's rights, refugee policy and others. This critical assessment of US foreign policy not only questions recent decision-making concerning these areas of human rights, but also makes recommendations on how the current administration might rectify these problems and, as John Shattuck explains, "guide the United States back to its rightful place as a global leader" (40). This in essence is the common theme running through the chapters of this text—the articulation of policy recommendations for the Obama administration so that the United States might return to its rightful place in the moral fight against human rights abuses. This primary policy goal is both this book's strength and its weakness, but whether one finds merit in this text will in many ways depend on what the individual reader is seeking from this volume.

The value of this book is its desire to go beyond simple criticism and engage in definitive, clearly explicated policy recommendations. Such an approach to the topic is to be expected, given the non-governmental organization (NGO) activist backgrounds of most of the authors. In each chapter, the concluding section details a list of policy recommendations that will assist US policy-makers in righting the wrongs of past US human rights policy. For instance, Catherine Powell, at the conclusion of her discussion of American exceptionalism, provides a clear list of future policy recommendations. These include: becoming a state party to the International Criminal Court (ICC), ratifying several key human rights treaties, and performing a review of all reservations on past treaties, among others. This type of definitive policy advocacy is a wonderful means by which to initiate a conversation on the topic and therefore provides academics with a profitable teaching tool. Such explicit advocacy is also a necessary component of moving US human rights policy forward from what many would consider a less than desirable historical record. A text that provides such thoughtful recommendations for future policy is a valuable resource to any policy-minded student, scholar, advocate, or interested citizen.

However, the primary criticism of this text is also found in its policy recommendations. Although I commend the authors in their desire to put forth clearly defined changes for the current administration, these recommendations tend to lack an understanding of the historical foundations of US human rights policy and, more importantly, appear to place all blame for a flawed US human rights agenda on the neoconservative movement and the George W. Bush administration. Both the introductory chapter by William Schulz and the national security chapter, authored by John Shattuck, are prime examples of these flaws. In the introductory chapter, Schulz provides a reasonable account of the neoconservative movement and its approach to human rights. One cannot argue with the conclusion that the policies implemented by this movement's followers did nothing to further the cause of human rights. However, Schulz, Shattuck, and most of the other contributing authors appear to blame this movement for all US human rights policy failures. The language throughout this text is one in which the United States is revered for its human rights policies prior to the Bush administration, when the reality is that the realism of administrations like Nixon's and the perceived liberalism of purported pro-human

rights administrations, such as Clinton's, did not result in any substantial policy change concerning human rights. The reality is that the United States has historically failed to appropriately respond to cases of genocide or crimes against humanity (with the exception of Kosovo and the delayed response in Bosnia), remains one of two countries to not ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, took nearly forty years to ratify the Genocide Convention, and still has not ratified several other key human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Unfortunately, the history of US human rights policy has been primarily one of exceptionalism (as Catherina Powell points out), sometimes exemptionalism, but rarely substantive leadership. Clearly, as this text articulates, the Bush administration did nothing to assist in changing this history and probably did more damage than most of its predecessors; but it is empirically inaccurate to ignore the historical context that preceded this acknowledged low point in US human rights foreign policy.

Nonetheless, this text remains a useful tool for furthering discussions on the future of US human rights policy. As stated earlier, the authors thoughtfully advocate for change by not simply decrying the past, but by attempting to show the way forward. Although the chosen path may sometimes seem impractical and often wanting in analysis of its details and consequences, it does provide students, scholars and policy-makers with an opening for debate and discussion that is oftentimes lacking in the current literature. Without an idealist vision of what is possible, the notion of an improved US human rights agenda is not possible. For this fact alone, this text is a worthwhile read.

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